

Review of
Strategic Intelligence Production
by
Washington Platt

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Brigadier General Washington Platt has been an intelligence officer for some ten years, and he clearly loves his work. It would be pleasant to record, therefore, that General Platt's book, Strategic Intelligence Production, makes a really significant contribution to the literature of intelligence. However, although much of the book is rewarding and thought provoking, it is as a whole disappointing when viewed both against the gaps in the present literature, and against the objectives which the author apparently sets out for himself.

The word "apparently" in the last sentence is used deliberately, for the objective of the book is not entirely clear. The preface contains the statement (p. xvii) that the book is intended "as one step towards the development of first principles in the field of Strategic Intelligence Production." Chapter I (pp. 3-4) makes a

1/ Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1957.

similar statement, adding that the primary purpose of the book is to present concepts pertaining to strategic intelligence production. One might expect, therefore, that the book would devote considerable attention to the theory and philosophy of strategic intelligence, to the broad first principles which make it what it is and which distinguish it from other kinds of intelligence and from other fields of learning. Aside from scattered statements, however, often in the nature of obiter dicta, one looks in vain for a discussion along these lines.

Consider, for example, the term "strategic intelligence." Strategic intelligence is defined formally in a single paragraph (p. 8), and its components are listed in another (p. 9). Although the term is used frequently thereafter and although methods and techniques for strategic intelligence production are given, very little else is said about its nature. What is strategic about strategic intelligence? How does strategic intelligence differ from combat intelligence and from other forms of intelligence, if any? What is the relationship between strategic intelligence and policy? What is strategic intelligence supposed to provide for the formulation of policy, and where does one end and the other begin? Any systematic discussion of these and other important first principles is conspicuously absent.

To be fair to the author, it may not have been his purpose to consider these broader aspects. The stated aim of the book is to develop the principles of strategic intelligence production (as opposed to strategic intelligence, period), and the emphasis is put explicitly on the working level (p. 4). Hence, when the author speaks of

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principles, he may be thinking of bread-and-butter principles designed to provide the reader with a "how to" book or (perhaps unfairly) a sort of intelligence do-it-yourself kit. To make a crude analogy, the author may not have intended to talk about transportation but merely about how to assemble an automobile. In any case, the result has been to divorce the working principles of strategic intelligence production from the broader theoretical and philosophical principles to which they relate. In doing so, the author has omitted the kind of material which probably most needs development in the literature and has rendered the principles which he gives us less meaningful and helpful than they otherwise would have been.¹ General Platt's book is essentially a presentation of certain basic principles of strategic intelligence production and of methods[and tools useful to the intelligence analyst]. Chapters are devoted to the subject matter and methods] of the social sciences and the assistance they can give the intelligence officer, to probability and certainty, and to forecasting. The author also gives us discussions of the differences between information and intelligence, of the scientific method and its application to strategic intelligence production, and of intelligence production as an act of creative thinking. The last chapter covers the characteristics of the intelligence profession.

The book presents (pp. 40-45) nine principles of intelligence production said to be similar in their field to Clausewitz's principles of war: namely, purpose, definitions, exploitation of sources,

significance, cause and effect, spirit of the people, trends, degrees of certainty, and conclusions. One can scarcely quarrel with the relevance and importance of these principles to the production of strategic intelligence. Agreeing with these principles, however, is much like agreeing, Coolidge-like, that sin is bad and motherhood admirable. Although each of the principles is elaborated elsewhere in the book, one is left with the feeling that he has been given a skeleton without very much flesh on it. The reason, I think, is fairly clear: here as elsewhere the book concentrates on working principles and methods to the virtual exclusion of broader theoretical considerations. As a result, we are given many fine hats, but no hat rack on which to hang them. The fact that the author may not have intended to give us a hat rack makes the hats no easier to handle.

It is interesting that the author compares his nine principles not only with Clausewitz's principles of war but also with the Ten Commandments. It may be remarked that during New Testament times the Pharisees, among others, were criticized, not because they disobeyed the Ten Commandments, but because they obeyed them rigidly, literally, and pridefully, and without spirit, compassion, or understanding. The user of General Platt's nine principles faces a similar risk, for although adherence to these principles is a necessary condition to the production of good strategic intelligence, it is not a sufficient condition.

The author states that the book is "purposely discursive" because such discursiveness is necessary in a field with "so little unity of

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background, or systematic development of general principles" (pp. 6-7). However much this may be true, the book is not well organized or put together and frequently does not develop its themes systematically or comprehensively. Moreover, the presentation is often not as clear or as convincing as it should be and is sometimes downright irritating or dangerously incomplete. The book discusses at some length whether there is a group or a national character and, if so, whether information can be gained about it (pp. 165 ff). It gives a yes answer to both of these questions. A closely related question -- How foreign are foreigners? (pp. 176 ff) -- is not given a yes or no answer, but it is clear that the author believes there is some "foreignness" in foreigners. I wish that the author had gone one step further (and incidentally, in so doing better pulled his discussion together) by warning the intelligence officer that he is fatally and irrevocably lost if he does not put himself in the context of thought and/or action of the people or events which he is studying. Elsewhere the author attempts to quantify the depreciation of the "inherent value" of various kinds of intelligence with time by stating, for example, that strategic intelligence depreciates 10 percent per month in wartime, so that at the end of 6 months it has lost half its value and at the end of 9 months nearly three-fourths (p. 28). These rates of depreciation are presented out of hand, and despite a qualifying footnote, not as orders of magnitude, but as more or less fixed and immutable laws. It is difficult to decide whether to be horrified, or amused. As a final example, the author discusses the normal curve of frequency distribution and suggests that a bimodal curve makes

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it practically certain that the group studied was in fact two groups of diverse origin (pp. 189-191). The reader is left with the impression that the normal curve is the most common kind of curve encountered in the social sciences and that deviations from it merely reflect the mixture of two universes or inadequate sampling. Actually the analyst in many of the social sciences will only rarely encounter a normal curve, not because he has mixed universes or developed bad samples, but simply because the universe with which he deals does not group itself in the manner described by the so-called normal curve.

On the positive side, many of the principles and methods developed in the book are decidedly well worth stating and ought to be part of the mental make-up and box of tools of every producer of strategic intelligence. None of these principles is strikingly new, but each is at least useful and often more than that, and together they constitute a helpful collection of tools and techniques. For example, the author discusses two important differences between the usual kind of creative scholarship and the kind required for the production of strategic intelligence (Chapter II). The importance of these differences -- usefulness and timeliness -- can scarcely be overemphasized, not only to those newly entering intelligence work, but also to its current practitioners. The author ~~also~~ makes a quite useful distinction between information and intelligence, which is discussed at some length in Chapter III. Another chapter (Chapter V) attempts, although not entirely successfully, to develop the relationship between the social sciences and strategic intelligence. This portion of the book points up the similarity between the subject matter and methods of the social sciences and strategic intelligence.

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sciences and intelligence and suggests that a thorough grounding in one or more of the social sciences is a most useful background for the strategic intelligence officer. The book also contains in one chapter, entitled "Probability and Certainty", and in another, entitled "Forecasting", a number of specific tools of analysis which can be of considerable use to the intelligence analyst.

The author first touches upon another important issue almost casually. Early in the book (p. 7) he states that "In part I . . . we recognize intelligence as one of the social sciences." Far from explicitly providing and justifying this recognition, however, Part I does not even consider this question. The last chapter of the book discusses at some length the characteristics of the intelligence profession compared with other professions. Here the author states that "perhaps it would be more correct to say that as at present practised intelligence has the makings of a profession, rather than that it is a profession" (p. 250) (emphasis in the original). A discussion then follows in which the author states that intelligence now lacks most of the characteristics of a learned profession, the key elements of which he lists and discusses. In short, the author asserts that intelligence is at once a social science and not a profession.

Although the author asserts early in the book that intelligence is one of the social sciences, he seems to write subsequently as though it were not. Intelligence is conspicuously missing from the list of the social sciences in Chapter V. The author invariably

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refers to the social sciences and never to the other social sciences, even when, if intelligence is a separate social science, the context calls for the latter expression. Finally, the author discusses what he believes to be a desirable undergraduate curriculum as preparation for an intelligence career and pleads for professional schools of intelligence at the graduate level. It is notable that his list of undergraduate fields includes only courses provided by the conventional social sciences such as modern history, geography, and economics. His graduate school, which is to provide advance studies "specifically in /the intelligence/ profession," is to teach "the underlying philosophy and improved [sic] methodology of intelligence," (p. 260) and "to do systematic research into intelligence production methods or to explore the basic principles of this great field of human activity" (p. 260) (emphasis in the original). Nowhere, however, is a particular course or field of study laid out, nor does the author describe exactly what is to be taught.

In the first issue of Studies in Intelligence, Sherman Kent wrote a lucid and stimulating article on the need for intelligence literature. 1/ Dr. Kent argued that "intelligence has become, in our own recent memory, an exacting, highly skilled profession and an honorable one Intelligence today is not merely a profession, but like most professions it has taken on the aspects of a discipline: it has developed a recognized methodology; it has developed a

1/ "The Need for an Intelligence Literature," Studies in Intelligence, September 1955, pp. 1-11.

vocabulary; it has developed a body of theory and doctrine; it has elaborate and refined techniques. It now has a large professional following. What it lacks is a literature." 1/ Kent says, then, that intelligence is definitely a learned profession and close to being a discipline. General Platt, in contrast, concedes to intelligence that higher order of development to a discipline but does not believe it yet to be a profession.

Dr. Kent's article has stimulated considerable discussion of whether intelligence in fact has the attributes of a separate discipline and, if so, what those attributes are. General Platt's belief that intelligence falls short of being a learned profession should stimulate even more. The issues are much too complex to be considered here, even if the reviewer felt competent to do so. The reviewer believes, however, more or less intuitively, that intelligence is without question a separate profession, and a learned profession at that, because in Kent's terms it requires native intelligence, rigorous training, and both general competence and intensive specialization. With respect to whether intelligence is a separate discipline, it may be noted that the recognized disciplines, in addition to possessing a body of theory and a methodology and vocabulary, also deal with a particular subject matter which is more or less distinct from the subject matter of the other disciplines. Strategic intelligence, however, deals with a variety of events and circumstances encompassing

1/ Ioc. cit., p. 2, 3

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almost every form of human activity, which are also the concern of the conventional natural and social sciences. Most of us believe, however, intuitively at least, that intelligence is more than the mere parroting of any one of these disciplines and more than their simple sum. Must we not then discover what this "more" is, and, just as important, record it for all to see, before we can know who we are and where we belong?

To some, all this may seem a mere jousting with windmills or a playing with words, particularly since the job to be done seems so clear and the time it allows for speculation so discouragingly small. Surely, however, this is not the case. Issues such as these must be faced as part and parcel of that looking at ourselves which marks our growing up. Until we face them, make up our minds about them, and write down our thoughts and our conclusions, we cannot really know about ourselves. General Platt has attempted to do this, although only partially successfully, and he is to be commended for trying.

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